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Pattern of conferences

Availability of documentation for the proper functioning of intergovernmental bodies

Submission of documentation consistent with the six-week rule

Implementation of recommendations regarding the United Nations Chronicle

Re-engineering of the optical disk system

Remote interpretation

Provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other major groupings

Excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations and issues related to recruitment of language staff

Utilization of the United Nations conference centres in Bangkok and Addis Ababa

Improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi

Report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions

1. The Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions has considered the reports of the Secretary-General on the availability of documentation for the proper functioning of intergovernmental bodies (A/56/299), submission of documentation consistent with the six-week rule (A/56/300), implementation of recommendations regarding the *United Nations Chronicle* (A/56/339), re-engineering of the optical disk system (A/56/120/Rev.1), remote interpretation (A/56/188), provision of interpretation services to meetings of regional and other

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major groupings of Member States (A/56/213 and Corr.1), excessive vacancy rates in language services at some duty stations and issues related to recruitment of language staff (A/56/277), utilization of the United Nations conference centres in Bangkok and Addis Ababa (A/56/293) and improved utilization of conference facilities at the United Nations Office at Nairobi (A/56/133 and Corr.1). During its consideration of the reports, the Advisory Committee met with representatives of the Secretary-General, who provided additional information.

2. In its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003 (see A/56/7, chap. II, sect. 2), the Advisory Committee commented in detail on many of the issues discussed in the above-mentioned reports. Additional specific comments on a number of the reports are given below.

3. With regard to the reports of the Secretary-General on the availability of documentation for the proper functioning of intergovernmental bodies (A/56/299) and submission of documentation consistent with the six-week rule (A/56/300), the Advisory Committee is of the view that, given the close relationship of the issues and in the interest of streamlining documentation, these two reports should have been consolidated into one. In the opinion of the Committee, the availability of documentation for intergovernmental bodies cannot be properly considered without also considering compliance with the six-week rule.

4. The Advisory Committee welcomes the innovation described in paragraph 3 of document A/56/300, by which the Department of General Assembly Affairs and Conference Services replaced, at no additional cost, the traditional paper-based management system for the coordination of the submission of documentation with a computerized database application. The Committee notes, as indicated in paragraphs 7 and 8 of the same document, that out of a total of 462 pre-session documents, 365, or 79 per cent, were submitted after the 4 July deadline. The Committee also notes that only half of those late submissions carried footnotes provided by the author department, in accordance with section III, paragraph 10, of General Assembly resolution 55/222 of 23 December 2000, concerning the reasons for late submission. **The Committee encourages further development of this system and urges author departments to comply with Assembly resolution 55/222.**

5. As indicated in paragraphs 4 and 5 of the report of the Secretary-General on implementation of the recommendations regarding the United Nations Chronicle (A/56/339), in 1996, owing to the financial crisis of the Organization, the Department of Public Information decided to suspend publication of the Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish editions of the Chronicle. In the context of its consideration of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999, the General Assembly decided that the Chronicle should be produced four times a year in all the official languages of the United Nations (resolution 52/220 of 22 December 1997, annex II, para. 45).

6. The Advisory Committee notes, as indicated in paragraphs 6 and 7 of the report, that in compliance with General Assembly resolution 52/220, the Department of Public Information undertook a project to produce a pilot edition of the United Nations Chronicle in Arabic, Chinese, Russian and Spanish in order to assess the costs and feasibility of resuming regular production of those language editions. The experience of the pilot project showed that a lengthy period of time was required to carry out, through an external contractor, the typesetting, proofreading and layout of

the edition and that consequently the edition would lose its value. The project was therefore discontinued and the Chronicle continued to be issued in English and French only. Upon request, the Committee was provided with detailed information concerning the publishing costs for the Chronicle in the biennium 2000-2001, which total $180,747.

7. It is not clear to the Advisory Committee how the results of the pilot project led to the conclusion in paragraph 7 of the report that the production of the Chronicle in all the official languages would require "a secure financial basis" in order to ensure "parity in quality and timeliness between all editions". The Committee notes, as indicated in paragraph 7, that resource requirements of $1.3 million have been included in the proposed programme budget of the Department for the biennium 2002-2003 for the publication of the Chronicle four times a year in all six official languages. **Under the circumstances, the Committee recommends that, on the basis of information from the Secretariat, a critical assessment be undertaken by the relevant intergovernmental bodies of the utility of the Chronicle in general, including an analysis of the demand for the Chronicle in the various languages, the merits of its distribution online and the method of its publication and printing.**

8. The Advisory Committee takes note of the progress made in the re-engineering of the optical disk system, as described in the report of the Secretary-General (A/56/120/Rev.1). The new system, which will be fully Web-based, uses industry-standard software and will be accessible to users anywhere in the world using a standard Web browser on a personal computer. This contrasts with the old system, which, for the most part, required the user to have a proprietary client software on his or her personal computer and direct connectivity between the user's personal computer and the system. The old system could also be accessed through the Internet, but the functionality of the system in that access mode was somewhat limited in a number of overseas offices.

9. The advantages of the new system include the fact that the system can be operated and maintained by United Nations staff members, and therefore improvements and modifications can be done quickly and easily. In addition, additional data capacity can be obtained simply by adding more disks, and more users can be accommodated by adding memory chips and processing units. The Advisory Committee notes that phase 1 of the re-engineering, which involved migration of the old system to the new platform, was completed in early September 2001. The Committee was informed that phase 2, which entails provision for full multilingual support function (that is, access and search functions using any of the six official languages of the United Nations), would be completed at the end of January 2002.

10. Upon enquiry, the Advisory Committee was informed that, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 51/211 F of 15 September 1997, access to the optical disk system is provided free of charge for permanent and observer missions and other government offices of Member States, with a maximum of 10 access passwords for each Member State, as well as for United Nations staff. In addition, the system is available to public users for an annual subscription fee of $2,250 per user (however, non-profit organizations receive a discount). The Committee was informed that there were currently approximately 8,000 users registered, of which

84 per cent were staff members, 14 per cent Member States and 2 per cent paid subscribers.

11. The Advisory Committee notes, as indicated in paragraph 27 of the report, that as of 28 August 2001, the limit on the number of users per Member State had been increased from 10 to 20 users per Member State. The Committee was informed that restrictions on the number of users would gradually be reduced, and it was expected that all restrictions would be removed within a year.

12. The Advisory Committee welcomes the progress made in the re-engineering of the optical disk system and encourages the Secretariat to continue to work towards unrestricted and free access to the system for all accredited non-governmental organizations. In this connection, the Committee recalls paragraph VII.19 of its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003 (A/56/7). **The availability of the system should be advertised as widely as possible, at United Nations Headquarters and regional offices, as well as in the United Nations information centres.**

13. As regards the report of the Secretary-General on remote interpretation (A/56/188), the Advisory Committee reiterates its encouragement of the continued exploration of the feasibility of large-scale remote interpretation, which in the view of the Committee, is an application with enormous potential (see A/56/7, para. I.54). From the information provided to it, the Committee concludes that the technical problems related to remote interpretation are not insurmountable. The Committee therefore urges the Secretariat to intensify its efforts to find solutions to those problems, as well as to issues pertaining to the working conditions of interpreters. The Committee also requests the Secretariat to submit a progress report on this question to the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session, in the context of the report requested in paragraph 16 below.

14. The Advisory Committee notes from paragraph 12 of the report of the Secretary-General on excessive vacancy rates in the language services at some duty stations and issues relating to the recruitment of language staff (A/56/277) that it had not proved possible to implement the system of non-monetary mobility incentives for language staff that had been envisaged in response to General Assembly resolution 53/208 A of 18 December 1998. The reasons for this included the need for uniform treatment of language and non-language staff, in particular in the implementation of established rules governing placement and promotion. However, upon enquiry, the Committee was informed of a number of incentives that had yielded some success, including (a) transfer with promotion of staff members who, while fully qualified for promotion, would have had to wait longer for promotion if they had stayed at their original duty station; (b) one- or two-year assignments to an overseas duty station with guaranteed reabsorption at the base duty station; and (c) giving first call on new examination rosters to duty stations with high vacancy rates.

15. The Advisory Committee expresses concern at the downward trend in the yield of language examinations in the past few years, which is discussed in paragraphs 20 to 28 of the report. The Committee takes note of the possible reasons for the decline as put forth in the report. In this connection, the Committee also notes, as indicated in paragraph 37, that the common examinations introduced in 1999 for the recruitment of editors, translators and verbatim reporters did not yield good results,

and that they have therefore been discontinued in favour of jointly held examinations for the three functions, which will produce three separate rosters of successful candidates.

16. The Advisory Committee welcomes the plans outlined in paragraphs 29 to 36 of the report to institute training programmes in the language services to address recruitment difficulties. For interpretation, this would involve reinstating a training programme for candidates from competitive interpreter examinations whose overall scores were lower than the passing score, but high enough to warrant their selection for a period of intensive in-house training in preparation for the next competitive examination. The duration of training would normally be three months, with the possibility of extension for an additional three-month period. The Committee notes, as indicated in paragraph 34, that the training activities for the current biennium would be implemented within the approved level of the programme budget for the biennium 2000-2001. Any additional requirements would be reported in the context of the second programme budget performance report. Upon enquiry, the Committee was informed that, for the period from August 2001 to May 2002, the level of resources required for the training programme would not exceed $250,000. **The Committee recommends approval of the training initiative for interpreters for an initial period of one year, subject to the submission to the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session of information on the results of the training activities, the continuing need for the programme and related financial arrangements.**

17. The Advisory Committee also welcomes the on-the-job training for translators that is already in place for promising candidates that have been identified through the examination for contractual translators. Under this arrangement, candidates who are not proficient enough to be included in the roster of contractual translators but who show good potential are recruited as entry-level freelances for short periods, during which, while doing regular translation work under close supervision, they undergo intensive on-the-job training, thereby increasing their chances of success in a forthcoming competitive examination. The Committee notes, as indicated in paragraph 36 of the report, that this arrangement entails minimal cost, as trainees are productive during their training period, and that the results have been encouraging.

18. In a related matter, the Advisory Committee calls attention to the need to ensure cost-effectiveness in arrangements for contractual translation. **In this regard, the Committee requests that information be provided to the Fifth Committee on comparative costs of commercial translation and current arrangements for contractual translation at the United Nations. Relevant information should also be provided concerning the experience of Member States in this field. The question of assuring quality control must also be addressed.**

19. The Advisory Committee recalls its recommendations in paragraphs I.49 and I.55 of its first report on the proposed programme budget for the biennium 2002-2003 (A/56/7) concerning remote translation. The Committee reiterates its recommendation that the Secretary-General consider a system-wide approach to the most efficient use of remote translation to reinforce capacity, as well as its opinion that further investments in this technology should be made and that its implications with respect to staff deployment should be analysed, taking into account the need to ensure adequate support structure at the duty stations and the capacity to monitor performance and thereby ensure consistent quality control.